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Addiction on the Rise

Just like insecurity and unemployment, Afghanistan has been haunted by the menace of drugs as well and the authorities have not been able to take tangible measures against it. Afghanistan has not only been on the top in poppy cultivation but it also tops the ranks in its utilization. Therefore, many people can be found in different parts of the country who have been suffering from drug addiction and their futures seem to be completely dark. The hopes of their rehabilitation are very meager as the authorities fail to provide any facilities to save them.

The issues of poppy cultivation and drug smuggling are not taken seriously by the Afghan authorities. In fact, the international help and support have also not focused much to curb the situation. Unfortunately, the poppy cultivation and its smuggling are linked with the networks of organized crime in the country that further extends to international mafia and drug dealing and they have their strong backers in the international drug market and national authorities who appear to be guardians of the nation. But one of the most alarming and unfortunate facts is that they have their links with the terrorist networks in the country. The growing insurgency and expanding networks of terrorism suggest that the terrorists have strong financial support and currently there are many reports that disclose the fact that the terrorist networks receive most of their funding from the same source. This scenario is really very much threatening. This is going to ruin the lives of the people of Afghanistan in various ways and unfortunately no break in it seems very much likely – at least not in near future as the statistics show that there has been and there will be increase in the opium production in the country if not handled properly.

Indifference towards the above mentioned issue has led to the addiction of the Afghan people themselves and the statistics clearly show that the number of addicts are rising in different parts of the country. A current estimate by Counter-Narcotics Department shows that the number of drug addicts, especially women, is increasing with each passing day in Parwan province; but unfortunately, rehabilitation facilities remain limited. The Department estimates that there are around 3,890 male addicts and around 200 female addicts. The situation seems to be really grave and other parts of the country are not very much different. Even the capital Kabul seems to be a haven of the drug addicts; while the measures to curb the situation are non-existent.

The government so as to control the use of drugs must pursue a two-fold preventive strategy. First, the measures must be carried out to discourage its spread and use; means the objective should be to stop producing new addicts. Strict legal measures must be carried out to discourage the smuggling of drugs and its business. The convenient availability of different types of drugs makes many addicts each year.

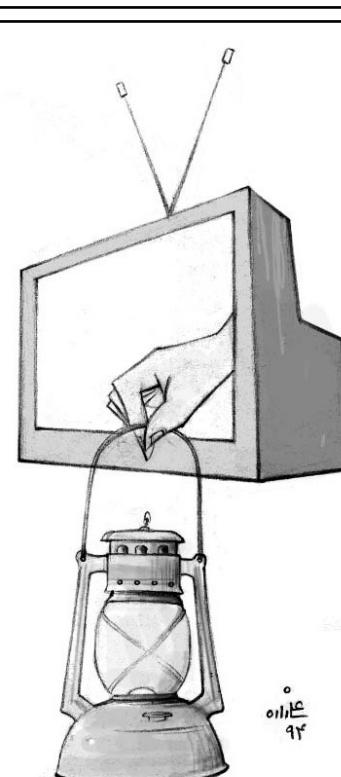
The second phase of the preventive campaign should involve the treatment of the addicts and availability of pleasant environment to them so that they should avoid using drugs and return to positive living. In this regard the establishment of the medical and rehabilitation centers can play a key role. Well-developed and properly managed hospitals and rehabilitation centers for the addicts can really bring back the addicts from the alleys of the darkness to the horizons of the illumination. It is hapless to mention that the number of such centers is insufficient in Afghanistan.

There are only few such centers in the urban areas while most of the people, who are addicted to drugs, do not have access to such opportunities. It should also be mentioned that the ones that are present are not equipped with latest technology, medicine and techniques. The patients after such treatment, instead of becoming a positive member of society, are further pushed towards addiction and crimes.

Their confidence on the social setup and their expectations from their fellow beings are all shattered and they find refuge in the cozy arms of drugs, where they are not haunted by troubles, worries and pains. So, the important thing is that the centers that are established to treat the victims of drugs addiction must not only be equipped with latest technology and techniques, but also well-trained and affectionate doctors and caretakers.

The suggested measures can really play a role in discouraging the use of drugs; nevertheless, they are short-term. For a considerable reduction in the use of this menace, it is vital that better living conditions must be provided to the people as most of the people become addicted because of their poor socio-economic circumstance. In addition, the production and smuggling of the drugs should be banned as much as possible through a trust-worthy and strong law and order system. No compromise should be tolerated in this regard. Even the most powerful should be brought to justice and the mechanism of law and order must not be hijacked the terrorist networks and criminal syndicates. Shortly, it is important that the rule of law should be maintained throughout the country.

Moreover, awareness campaigns must be launched in different parts of country that can spread awareness about the ferocity of this hazard and that has the capacity to generate intense hatred against it and inculcate within the minds of our people the dignity of life and its importance.



Fighting Corruption: a Prerequisite for Peace and Democracy

By Abdul Ahad Bahrami

A joint report released by two major transparency advocacy organizations warns that the government of Afghanistan "can only ensure survival of the state and bring about peace in the country if it acts immediately to prevent corruption, limit political interference and nepotism, and bring the corrupt to justice". The assessment of the Transparency International and its partner organization Integrity Watch Afghanistan has examined weaknesses that have undermined billions of dollars of international assistance to Afghanistan and helped the prolonged war in Afghanistan. In reaction to the report, an official of the Human Rights Watch has said that Afghan president Ashraf Ghani has committed himself to fighting corruption, and the report provides a roadmap for him to fulfill his promise. The report is released at a time when the efforts of the Afghan government and its international backers are focused on security issues and making peace with the Taliban. The government is facing unprecedented task of fighting a heightened Taliban insurgency after the drawdown of US forces and the conclusion of NATO combat mission in the country. The anti-insurgency campaign has been immensely overwhelming for the Afghan government after the draw downing of foreign forces. The Afghan government's focus on the war efforts as well as the peace process has potentially undermined its anti-corruption campaign. The collective efforts backed by the international community to fight corruption and promote good governance in Afghanistan have largely gone into a marginal issue. This is while fighting corruption was one of the key election promises of the leaders of the national unity government in the 2014 presidential elections. Despite some drastic measures in some key high-profile cases of corruption, the national unity government has largely failed in leading a genuine fight against corruption due to the distracting and overwhelming security challenges and the pervasiveness of corruption in public and government institutions. A recent report by the International Transparency put Afghanistan among top three most corrupt countries in the world. Based on the report, corruption has increased in Afghanistan since the takeover of the national unity government in the country. The report clearly suggested that the anti-corruption efforts of the national unity government had failed. What further compounds the challenges for fighting corruption in Afghanistan is that there is less cohesion among the Afghan leaders over the critical issue. While corruption is particularly pervasive among senior management of the government and public institutions, government and public authorities are often quarrelling over who are corrupt and how to find ways to fight this menace. There have been blame games going on among leaders, government officials and members of the parliament. Lack of cohesion among the political spectrum in the country has further undermined government's ability to monitor government and public agencies and pursue corrupt officials. And lack of oversight, in turn, has been as an incentive and encouraged corrupt officials and public representatives to continue misusing public funding.

The approach of the government leaders to fight corruption has been

terribly flawed. The government has failed to forge a comprehensive anti-corruption policy and institutionalize fighting corruption. So far, there have been sporadic measures taken by the government in dealing with some few but important cases of corruption. The measures to deal with the biggest cases of financial scandals such as the Kabul Bank's corruption case are praiseworthy. However, the efforts have not been systematic and sustainable, and failed to make any perceivable difference in reducing corruption in the country. The government is bound to amend its approach and promote the anti-corruptions efforts into a comprehensive and long-term sustainable campaign. Only an institutionalized campaign would be able to get Afghanistan rid of the phenomenon.

The task is particularly an excruciating task given that corruption is highly pervasive in government and public institutions and many of the authorities involved with the anti-corruption efforts are themselves corrupt. In fact, almost the whole system is corrupt. The government cannot start a genuine anti-corruption campaign without establishing a clean and committed agency with sufficient authority to drive and lead the campaign. For this and for leading a sustainable anti-corruption campaign, the government needs to heed the call of the Transparency International and Integrity Watch Afghanistan and implement its recommendations. As the first step, the government should establish a new independent, committed and corruption-free body to lead and oversee the efforts against corruption. Once initiating such a plan, the government needs to ensure that the new body would work free of political interferences from outside.

The effectiveness and legitimacy of the Afghan judiciary is also undermined by the pervasive corruption. Afghan judges are believed to be involved in day-to-day corruption when resolving legal disputes. There were reports in the past of high-profile detainees such as corrupt officials, drug lords and other potentially dangerous elements being released from prisons through paying bribes to the judges and government authorities. According to media reports, at the height of Afghanistan and US campaign on drugs before 2010, some prominent drug lords, with some of whom having international fame, managed to escape Afghan detention centers by help of corrupt officials and government authorities. The Afghan government needs to boost the status, legitimacy and efficiency of the judiciary by building it anew and fighting corruption from within institution. At the beginning days of his presidency, Ashraf Ghani took some drastic measures aimed at reforming the Afghan judicial system. But admittedly the measures have gone nowhere as there have been no comprehensive anti-corruption efforts driven by political will from the government and national consensus. The government should not waste time in getting the fight on track and leading it to the right direction. For a successful anti-corruption drive, the government first needs to promote political consensus at national level; and then start leading an institutionalized campaign against corruption. As noted by the Transparency International's report, successful campaign against corruption is crucial for the success of the efforts to bring peace and stability and build democracy in Afghanistan.

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Virtual Education in Conflict Zones

By Gordon Brown

Educating refugees and children in conflict zones is one of the biggest challenges facing the international community. Their schools have been reduced to rubble. Their teachers have fled or are struggling to survive. Their libraries have been looted or burned.

Fortunately, solutions are possible. After all, these days, compelling lectures and well-stocked libraries are available at the click of a button. A bold pilot project, sponsored by the Dubai-based MBZ Foundation, reflects this reality. The best coursework on offer – in mathematics, science, foreign languages, and literature – can be loaded onto a mobile phone and placed in a student's hand. If the 58 million children who are currently unable to attend school cannot be brought to a classroom, then the classroom must be brought to them.

Aid groups are already blazing the trail, using the Internet to provide Syrian refugees with educational opportunities. The Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation, for example, is holding an international competition – called eduapp4Syria – to develop smartphone applications that "can build foundational literacy skills in Arabic and improve psychosocial well-being for Syrian refugee children aged five to 10."

Similarly, in Lebanon, the Beirut-based non-profit organization Sawa for Development and Aid, has developed NaTakallam, a service that offers unemployed Syrian refugees a chance to work as Arabic tutors. And in Egypt, the Nafham platform allows its users to upload educational videos on topics in the country's K-12 public school curriculum.

From abroad, the British Council offers online courses in English, through a program called "FutureLearn." And the Silicon Valley-based NGO ReBootKAMP and UNICEF's Raspberry Pi coding classes offer young refugees a chance to learn computer programming.

The Internet is being used to help refugees pursue higher education as well. The European Union is funding a three-year e-learning course to prepare 3,100 Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon for university. And the American nonprofit The University of the People has offered 10,000 Syrian refugees a tutor-supported online university education.

These efforts prove that, with the press of a button and the swipe of a finger, two million refugee children in Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan could be offered the opportunity to continue their studies.

The advantages of online learning are manifold. Prefabricated schools are expensive to ship and often unsuited for real learning. As these become less of a priority, funds will be freed for providing appropriate learning materials and on-site tutors.

This shift in emphasis opens opportunities for contributions by the private sector as well, revolutionizing how education is provided in conflict zones and other emergency situations. The Khan Academy, Google, Apple, and roughly 50 other companies have recognized this need, providing some \$70 million in funding, low-cost tablets, online education programs, and assistance with logistics. And in September, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg announced that his company would work with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to provide Internet access to all refugees.

History shows how much broad coalitions that transverse the private, public, and nonprofit sectors can accomplish. Private companies are often well positioned to deliver goods more quickly and less expensively than public institutions, allowing the latter to focus their efforts elsewhere. Examples of this dynamic include the startups and multinationals that have joined the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to help find a cure for Ebola and entrepreneurs using solar panels to provide off-grid electricity to remote villages in Africa.

But when it comes to providing education for out-of-school children, making the most of the opportunities provided by technology will require a clear, overarching vision. Efforts must be coordinated so that initiatives do not compete or interfere with one another.

Already, UNHCR has established a task force in Jordan to explore how information and computing technology can be leveraged to provide refugees with greater access to higher education. The Global Business Coalition for Education has offered to coordinate educational organizations and their private-sector partners. And in the lead up to the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul in May, private companies have already begun to mobilize resources and harness their capabilities in the service of innovation.

When the library at Alexandria burned in 48 BC, humanity did not crawl back into caves and stop learning. What went up in smoke was only the physical manifestation of human knowledge; the desire for discovery and progress remained intact. When the flames died down, our ancestors set out to recover the knowledge that had been lost.

That experience has been repeated throughout recorded history, and it should inform our response to the destruction of libraries and schools in Syria. Instead of asking the country's children to accept the end of their education, we must help them rebuild – with the most modern tools at our disposal. (Courtesy Project Syndicate)

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